

**A Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth Century Canada.** GEOFFREY BILSON.  
 Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. ix, 222 p. ISBN 0 8020 2367 3 bd.  
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At least 20,000 people died of cholera in British North America during the epidemics of the mid nineteenth century. In 1832, 1834, 1849, and 1854 major outbreaks flared up in the colonies, while similar, lesser incidents occurred in 1851, 1852, 1866 and 1871. The disease often struck with horrifying suddenness, killing apparently healthy individuals within hours of the onset of its violent symptoms. Although not invariably fatal, it left a broad trail of death, grief, and chaos in its wake. Government and medicine were driven before the plague, helpless to halt its deadly course. In the absence of an accurate understanding of the disease and how it was spread, the public health measures which officials enforced were pitifully inadequate. Equally useless were most of the bleedings, blisterings, emetics, medicines and assorted nostrums with which nineteenth century doctors treated cholera victims. At best, it would seem, physicians were a neutral force when they intervened in cholera cases; at worst they may well have been more dangerous than the disease itself. Little wonder colonists feared the cholera so greatly.

As *Archivaria* readers are aware, the study of medical history in Canada is now undergoing a metamorphosis. Formerly the exclusive preserve of elderly physicians, it has begun to attract the attention of a growing number of professional historians, only a few of them with medical education and clinical experience. Geoffrey Bilson's examination of cholera in nineteenth century British North America, one expression of this new interest, is a pioneering study in the social history of Canadian medicine. Much of the book necessarily deals with official responses to the onset of cholera, real or anticipated: the creation of quarantine facilities, the founding of hospitals, and the introduction of sanitary reforms in particular. Bilson describes these innovations at some length and assesses their limited efficacy. In this sense, *A Darkened House* does not depart too dramatically from the historian's traditional concern with public policy and elite behaviour. When viewing the epidemics through the eyes of those who were scourged, however, Bilson breaks new ground. He explores the popular fears aroused by cholera, and the protests provoked by public health measures which colonial governments hastily improvised and enforced. Temporary hospitals for indigent cholera victims were a major cause of alarm — among the poor because so few who entered ever left them alive, and among neighbouring residents because they feared living close to such a focus of infection. Another major source of antagonism was the hasty internment of cholera victims which local boards of health usually enforced, riding roughshod over the sensibilities of their friends and relations. On more than one occasion the aggrieved disinterred the unceremoniously buried in order to give them a proper funeral. When describing the impact of cholera, Bilson notes in particular the grievous affliction it imposed on the poor. Most often its incidence was greatest among the lower ranks who, financially, were least able to bear the heavy burdens which it imposed. Cholera also temporarily rendered the poor more visible than usual, both as sources of concern to health and sanitary inspectors and as objects of charity for moralizing middle class philanthropists.

While in some respects innovative, *A Darkened House* is also a cautious study. The author has not strayed far from his sources and has eschewed generalization beyond that which they clearly permit. The obvious limitation of the study is one over which he had no control: nineteenth century officials did not compile accurate statistics on the cholera epidemics and as a result Bilson has been unable to measure their effects with any degree of precision. Consequently, we are left with general descriptions of the course of the disease and its influence upon various social groups. The author's conclusion that the demographic consequences of the epidemics were slight may be true when seen in the light of the colonial population as a whole, but as the disease affected some segments of colonial society far more seriously than it did others — immigrants and the

poor for example — its impact on these groups may well have been much more substantial.

In any event, lacking a reliable body of quantifiable evidence, Bilson has relied largely upon literary sources, diaries and correspondence, petitions and reports, minutes and memoranda, and has supplemented them with a careful reading of colonial newspapers and medical journals — the stuff of traditional historical enquiry. The information so laboriously gleaned from this broadly-based enquiry has been pieced together in a faithful description of the course of the epidemics and their extensive social, administrative, and political repercussions. As is so often the case, the past has not left us all that we should like to know about cholera in nineteenth century British North America. But Bilson has salvaged more than we could reasonably expect, and has given us a compelling portrait of a Canada which, until now, we have not seen.

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**The League for Social Reconstruction: Intellectual Origins of the Left in Canada, 1930-1942.** MICHEL HORN. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. ix, 278 p. ISBN 0 8020 5487 0 \$20.00.

Michiel Horn's *The League for Social Reconstruction*, reflecting more than ten years of research, is a book that possesses an outstanding depth and scope. While far too many authors on the Canadian Left have followed the well-worn path of the protest movement becalmed model, dichotomizing a movement/party tension in the CCF and dwelling upon historical records at the Public Archives of Canada, Horn has chosen the largely unexplored but important topic of the League for Social Reconstruction (LSR) and has opted to conduct extensive research at a great number of archives throughout Canada. Augmented by an impressive array of interviews and textual analysis of LSR publications, the result is a book that is extremely informative for layman and scholar alike, sensible in its conclusions and, rare for an academic, very readable.

Horn's major thesis is that despite the relatively brief life span of the LSR, the decade 1932-1942, the LSR contributed a great deal to Canadian society. It left a permanent imprint on progressive Canadian intellectual thought in the areas of the welfare state and socialism. The LSR particularly pioneered in applying socialism to federalist and agrarian settings. On these two themes, the LSR was far ahead of its British counterpart, the Fabian Society. It also greatly assisted the growth of important Canadian institutions such as the *Canadian Forum*, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, and indirectly the CCF's successor, the New Democratic Party. Through overlapping memberships many prominent LSR figures were also instrumental in the activities of the Fellowship For a Christian Social Order, the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, the Canadian Radio League and the Civil Liberties Union. Horn's work thus provides useful insights into the early history of a substantial number of Canadian organizations. In the absence of any biographies elsewhere on Frank Underhill, F.R. Scott, Eugene Forsey, David Lewis, Harry Cassidy, King Gordon, George Grube, Leonard Marsh, Escott Reid, and Graham Spry, Horn's mini-biographies on the aforementioned are a positive start to increasing the covering on these important Canadian figures.

As an historian, Horn is quite successful at placing the LSR in the immediate social context and at drawing insights for the contemporary period. No chapter is more germane and sobering than that dealing with attacks upon academic freedom and civil liberties. E. Forsey, C. King, K. Gordon, F. Underhill and F.R. Scott resisted such pres-